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A Missile Defense Test for Congress

The Pentagon has not yet developed any technology that can reliably shoot down enemy missiles. Yet the Bush administration seems determined to sidestep Congressional and European misgivings and the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty and start building a rudimentary missile shield during its first term. Its latest gambit is a plan for a new test site in Alaska, with a few interceptor rockets stored nearby for possible emergency use. Some details remain unclear, but the arrangement could dangerously blur the distinction between testing and the fielding of an operational system.

Congress should insist that testing programs remain within the limits of the ABM treaty. It should not approve the deployment of an operational system until it is satisfied that the technology has been reliably proven and that every effort has been made to preserve the benefits of existing arms agreements. Senior Pentagon officials will testify today on missile defense issues before the Senate Armed Services Committee. Senators should use this hearing to press for more information on the Alaska plan and should demand assurances that it will not be used to circumvent the ABM treaty.

That treaty allows almost unlimited testing of ground-based defenses, but confines such testing to two designated sites, currently Kwajalein Island in the Pacific and White Sands, N.M. A new test from Kwajalein is scheduled for Saturday.

Shifting future tests to Alaska would require Russia's agreement. Moscow understands as well as everyone else that Alaska is where the United States would want to put a functioning missile defense base aimed at thwarting attack from North Korea. By agreeing to a change in test sites, Russia would, in effect, be taking the first important step toward modifying the ABM treaty to accommodate limited national missile defenses. Such agreement would be welcome. But it may not come in time for construction to start this summer on the Alaska test site, as the administration envisions.

Last month Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld refused to promise that nothing planned for the next budget year would breach the ABM treaty. Congress must insist on such a pledge before it approves any money for the Alaska test site.

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